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Beyond Goodwill: The Peace Corps' Contribution to National Security

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Introduction

As the Peace Corps finishes celebrating its 50th Anniversary, the organization, which has sent nearly 200,000 Americans to 139 nations to combat poverty, disease, and ignorance, all while developing immense goodwill between American volunteers and host country nationals, finds itself a target for budget cutters. Many conservatives would like to trim the amount spent on the Peace Corps, as well as other foreign assistance programs, especially as the budget deficit grows and calls increase for placing America's domestic needs first. At the same time, many conservatives oppose cutting defense spending, arguing that significant reductions would imperil the country's ability to protect itself. A close analysis however reveals that the Peace Corps is an important contributor to national security, though both conservatives and liberals might strenuously disagree: conservatives because they often look at the Peace Corps as a bastion of liberal do-gooders, as well as one of those previously mentioned foreign aid programs needing to be trimmed; and liberals because they do not want the Peace Corps associated in any way with national security. Though it is a bit heartening to see conservatives and liberals agreeing on something, in this case that the Peace Corps has little to do with national security, the record shows they are both wrong. The Peace Corps, whose spending is dwarfed by that of the Department of Defense, might even be the best security bargain in the entire budget.

Language and Culture

During a discussion with an employee of an African government (for security reasons individuals and nations will not be identified), the author asked him where he had learned such good English. His reply was from a Peace Corps volunteer, who was a very hard teacher, and then, after she left, from the next Peace Corps Volunteer, who was an even harder teacher. Smiling while stating their names, he said how thankful he was to have had the opportunity to learn English and that for several years afterwards he kept in touch with them even after they had returned to the United States.

The author has heard similar stories repeated numerous times, including from military officers of various African nations. This is a good thing because many American military officers, especially those on just a short assignment to a foreign country, are not fluent in the local language. While interpreters are quite helpful, they are not always readily available, and even when they are, besides the additional security risks of bringing more people into a conversation's loop, nuanced thoughts sometimes get lost in translation. There is also the possibility of mistranslations, accidental or deliberate, especially as many situations

probably arise where there is little or no opportunity to vet the local translator. Having host country officers who can speak English can help facilitate interaction - with less of a chance of misunderstandings occurring - among participants at joint military exercises.

This is not to say that American service members stationed in foreign countries should not learn the local language. To their credit many have already mastered a second language, and to the military's credit, there has been a great deal of emphasis on learning foreign languages. However, besides the previously mentioned short-term duties which bring American military personnel into a country for such a brief period it does not allow individuals to even begin to assimilate the language while stationed there, there is the problem of many countries having numerous languages and dialects. Nigeria alone has over 500, and while English is the official language, significant numbers only speak Hausa, Yoruba, or one of the many other indigenous languages. Thus, the defense attaché or other American military member assigned to Nigeria can only hope to become conversant in a fraction of that country's languages; having Nigerian military counterparts who speak English, thanks to Peace Corps volunteers, can make meaningful conversations without the limitations imposed by the use of translators significantly more likely.

From a cultural perspective, the Peace Corps helps foreign military personnel understand a bit about Americans before the two groups actually meet, thus countering many of the misperceptions, often acquired through the media, host country nationals frequently have regarding Americans. This applies not only to the host country military leadership, but also to the low-ranking foot soldier. Many a Peace Corps volunteer in a remote village has shared a drink in some rundown bar with young host country draftees who know little more about America than what they have seen in American movies or heard in American music. These encounters, between host country soldiers (or future soldiers) and Peace Corps volunteers, are non-intimidating, often conducted in the host country's native language without the need of interpreters, and frequently in the soldier's hometown or where the soldier is stationed. On several occasions this author has witnessed a fairly close relationship between soldiers in a remote village and a Peace Corps volunteer, with the soldiers, who also serve as the local police force, watching over the volunteer and giving safety advice. Numerous questions are often asked by the host country nationals, some serious relating to issues such as American foreign policy, but also many along the lines of what the soldiers hear on the radio or see in the movies. Sometimes it seems Hollywood and American music still reach even the most distant and inaccessible parts of the planet. Having Peace Corps volunteers there to put such media into perspective can help clear up a lot of strange ideas people have about the United States, paving the way for better interactions between the host country's military and America's.

Early Warning System

Peace Corps volunteers are sometimes the canaries in the coal mines, alerting others to potential trouble. Often serving in the hinterlands, their stories of dealing with corrupt officials, observing increased deforestation, or encountering crime in areas previously relatively crime-free make their way back as official reports or unofficial stories to the Peace Corps and frequently also to the American embassy. As the volunteers serve at the grassroots level, such stories often reflect the pulse of the country. Too much bad news from these individuals "embedded" in communities, to borrow a term often used by the military, might be an indication of increasing trouble, perhaps even instability.

Although the author is unaware of any formal use of Peace Corps volunteers to alert others to health hazards, it is quite conceivable they have also helped sound the alarm regarding communicable diseases. Volunteers who are nurses or community health workers might be the first to notice an outbreak of cholera, meningitis, or some other infectious disease that warrants further investigation by the host country's public health officials. At a regional level, this might prevent American soldiers from entering that area to conduct joint training exercises with local forces. At a global level, in this age of jet travel,

preventing individuals who may have been exposed to a serious disease in a foreign country - possibly a new, more virulent strain of one that is highly contagious - from stepping onto a plane and a short time later arriving in the United States is incredibly critical to protecting America from the outbreak of a possibly serious epidemic.

Legacy of Experience

It might surprise some to find that Peace Corps volunteers served in Somalia, Afghanistan, Libya, Pakistan, and Iran. Though these countries have not had Peace Corps programs for years, former volunteers can provide a legacy of experience, including valuable information that may not be available elsewhere. This can help Americans better understand the peoples of these countries, which is of immense concern with regards to security and international terrorism.

An oft repeated phrase, or perhaps better stated, an oft repeated criticism is that America did not understand the Afghan culture when it decided to invade and subsequently attempt nation building. Peace Corps volunteers who had spent two years there working at a grassroots level with the indigenous population probably could have given valuable advice to the military both before the invasion - warning them of the difficulties inherent in development programs in a country where much of the population is illiterate and tribal - and after the invasion, when their expertise could probably have smoothed some of the stabilization operations. As author Rajiv Chandrasekaran wrote in his book, *Little America*, regarding Afghanistan during the late 1960s, when a massive United States-sponsored irrigation project employing numerous U.S. engineers and technicians was being met with hostility, "There was one group of Americans who were welcomed warmly by the Afghans at the time: a motley lot of Peace Corps volunteers."^[1] Contrast this with a May 2011 report indicating many Afghan security personnel find American troops "extremely arrogant, bullying and unwilling to listen to their advice."^[2] The question of why the Peace Corps volunteer is so often welcomed can perhaps best be explained by the following quote from Sargent Shriver, who helped design and develop the organization:

He goes to a foreign country to work within that country's system; he helps fill their needs as they see them; he speaks their language; he lives in the way they live and under their laws; he does not try to change their religion; he does not seek to make a profit from conducting business in their country; he does not interfere in their religious, political, or military affairs. And because of this he has been welcomed where others have been turned away.^[3]

With America's increasing involvement in combating terrorism in Somalia, as well as its efforts to encourage democracy in Iran, it behooves America to tap all knowledgeable sources regarding these countries if for no other reason than to avoid some of the mistakes made in Iraq and Afghanistan. The wisdom of someone who spent two years fostering close relationships with Somalis or Iranians - learning their language, attending their celebrations, and, in many instances, being treated as "family" - could provide valuable background information for those trying to develop an appropriate course of action, diplomatic or military, involving these and other nations of concern to the United States where the Peace Corps has served.

Staffing the Embassies and Nongovernmental Organizations

This author does not know how many former Peace Corps volunteers are now serving as Foreign Service officers or in other capacities at American embassies, but he does find them to be ubiquitous in these settings. Even some ambassadors have done their time in a remote village, teaching sustainable

agricultural techniques or performing similar types of activities before joining the Foreign Service and progressing through the ranks. This point is most notably driven home by the recent killing of Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Libya, who several years before joining the Foreign Service had served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco.^[4]

For many former Peace Corps volunteers, working in the embassy is a way to continue their service to both America and the host country. It also appeals to their sense of adventure, which is why, in part, a good number of them joined the Peace Corps in the first place. Fortunately that can-do spirit, which enabled the volunteer to walk seemingly endless miles to ensure all children were vaccinated against a deadly disease; or start a women's co-op, fail, and then start again; or complete some other daunting task, is a commodity which also serves the Foreign Service, an organization often called upon to accomplish difficult and complex assignments in the host country, quite well.

Frequently it is the former Peace Corps volunteer now working in an embassy who not only is the most fluent speaker of the local language among the American-born embassy staff, but he or she can also provide the best cultural background information. This is not to diminish the excellent training and contributions of the other embassy workers; however, for a real grassroots perspective the former Peace Corps volunteer, who maybe spent two years in a small village without electricity, developing friendships and working on projects, all the while learning the local dialect of a national language, is often the one to go to for advice.

Fortunately, it is not just the Foreign Service in receipt of the talents of former volunteers. Numerous nongovernmental organizations are also staffed by these enthusiastic and idealistic individuals who are determined to make a difference in the world. With a renewed emphasis on stability operations, inevitably some American service members are going to find themselves not just working with former Peace Corps volunteers but actually depending on them to help complete their humanitarian missions.

The author also frequently encounters former Peace Corps volunteers serving as analysts in a variety of think tanks which provide insight and/or advice on security issues of great importance to the United States. These individuals bring their grassroots perspectives to discussions, and when they do field research in a less developed country, it could actually be in a real field talking with indigenous farmers. Such rural perspectives might be quite different from that obtained talking to the high-ranking government officials and other "suits" in the capital, and could provide key insights regarding a country's stability and security.

Development as a Conflict Preventer

Much has been written about the importance of development in preventing conflict. Below is a short list just touching on some of those writings:

- Education, especially of women, leads to decreased population growth, which, in turn, leads to decreased population pressure on scarce resources.^[5] As many conflicts are fought over resources, this is no small matter.
- Income-generating development projects can result in increased tax revenues, which, in turn, can help fund security forces and others who might deter conflict.
- Income-generating projects also improve the quality of life of the local people, helping to ensure they stay in their own area and not migrate somewhere that could cause friction with another group.^[6]

- Environmental projects help reduce land degradation, a potential additional pressure for population migration.[\[7\]](#)
- Health projects such as those to decrease the spread of HIV/AIDS help prevent children from being orphaned. In several countries with high HIV/AIDS rates, large numbers of orphaned children join criminal gangs or terrorist organizations.

Projects such as these are sometimes a part of military operations performed to stabilize an area. Especially when it comes to small-scale projects at the village level, it would be extremely valuable for the armed services to utilize the findings of an organization which has fifty years of experience in grassroots development. Granted, not all Peace Corps projects during those fifty years were successful, but that is even more reason for the American military to look, for it is probably as important, if not more so, to know what did not work so that efforts are not wasted on projects that failed in the past without understanding why they failed.

The expertise the Peace Corps has accumulated is substantial. From sustainable agriculture to women's cooperatives selling locally made clothing to designing village level health programs to countless other projects, the Peace Corps has a history of how to accomplish these difficult grassroots projects and frequently also the detailed written records which the military could study in order to learn how to proceed with its own development initiatives.

While many foreign assistance projects in Iraq and Afghanistan have been successful, many have also been abysmal and expensive failures. Should the need ever arise again for American armed forces to become involved in so many large-, medium-, and small-scale projects, it would behoove the military leaders to examine the Peace Corps' achievements, especially in the realm of the small-scale endeavors. To not do so would waste valuable military resources "reinventing the wheel" instead using them for other, more traditional military tasks, such as preparing to engage an enemy force.

Providing counterinsurgency guidance, in a 2008 *Military Review* article General David Petraeus, then commanding general of the Multi-National Force-Iraq, wrote as one of the key principles: "Employ money as a weapons system. Money can be 'ammunition' as the security system improves. Use a targeting board process to ensure the greatest effect for each 'round' expended and to ensure that each engagement using money contributes to the achievement of the unit's overall objectives."[\[8\]](#)

Unfortunately, as previously stated, tremendous sums of money were misspent, sometimes counterproductively, in these counterinsurgency efforts.[\[9\]](#) Had large numbers of former Peace Corps volunteers been consulted, they could have provided valuable instruction in obtaining "buy-in" from the villagers, the advantages of small-scale culturally appropriate technologies, or many of the other valuable development lessons they have learned. While the military may call it counterinsurgency and the Peace Corps may call it development efforts, the desired results are the same...more stable and secure areas. The difference is the Peace Corps is better at such work at the local level and for less cost, serving as an excellent example for the military to emulate.

Bringing the World Back Home

Returned Peace Corps volunteers are often asked to lecture in schools, places of worship, and other venues. This "bringing the world back home," where the volunteers describe not just their living arrangements and projects but also what the people were like with whom they lived for two years, helps educate the American public about other cultures. In a nation whose students often place near the bottom in the international ranking of knowledge regarding other countries, such presentations are a tremendous

help for geography-challenged Americans. Critical decisions regarding the international role of America's military demand an educated populace, and returned Peace Corps volunteers play a small, albeit important role in helping to deliver that important education.

One wonders if greater insight on the part of America's elected representatives, as well as its citizens, on the cultures of Afghanistan and Iraq would have resulted in different courses of action being pursued in those countries after 9/11. Perhaps if there had been more input from returned Peace Corps Volunteers who had served in Afghanistan more people would have been aware of the inherent development difficulties in that part of the world, resulting in more modest nation-building goals from the outset and a significant adjustment in both the military means and methods used to pursue them.

There is another aspect of "bringing the world back home" which would benefit the military, and that is for the members of the armed services to emulate it. Soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines should be encouraged to speak about their experiences at schools, places of worship, and other venues just as returned Peace Corps volunteers do. This is happening, to some extent, but nowhere near the degree to which it could, or probably should. The military—and not just the generals and admirals, but also the sergeants and petty officers—needs to take a page from the Peace Corps playbook and go out and explain the foreign culture and politics in the countries in which they were stationed. Thus, the Peace Corps has expertise not just in grassroots development in foreign lands but also grassroots publicity in the United States, skills the military could stand to nurture.

Conclusion

The Peace Corps is not like other foreign aid. It is American people who, living among host country nationals, teach about American culture while learning up-close about a foreign one. The village children learn English while the volunteer learns their language, the village adults learn soil conservation techniques while the volunteer learns their customs, and so on.

The intention is not to turn the Armed Forces into the Peace Corps. They are two separate organizations with very different missions. If the objective is to clear and hold a piece of territory, the American military is the organization to turn to, but if the objective is to win the hearts and minds of the people in that territory, the American military has not had a particularly good track record in recent times, and the Peace Corps, or people who utilize Peace Corps-type programs, may be the choice for this stage of the operation. However, whether intentional or not, the Peace Corps, like the branches of military service, contributes to America's national defense. By recognizing these contributions, and noting that dollar-for-dollar the Peace Corps might be one of the best national defense bargains going, even when the immense benefit of goodwill is not factored into the equation, perhaps the organization should be spared, at least in part, the budget axe.

The views expressed in Foreign Military Studies Office publications and reports are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

End Notes

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